DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 271 152 JC 860 358

AUTHOR Blanchard, Bryan
TITLE A Unifying Theme for General Education in Community Colleges.
PUB DATE Mar 84
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the National Workshop on General Education and the Mission of the Community College (Princeton, NJ, March 29-31, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Curriculum; College Faculty; *Community Colleges; *Curriculum Development; Delphi Technique; *Educational Improvement; Educational Objectives; Educational Trends; *General Education; *Teacher Attitudes; Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

National attention is currently focusing on the issue of general education in American colleges and universities, bringing to light the need for a unifying purpose and idea. Evidence such as declining test scores, grade inflation, and employer criticisms of college graduates have prompted public laments by academics themselves about the erosion of standards. It has become necessary for institutions to review the needs of their students and their own capacity to satisfy those needs. Using the Delphi Technique to survey its faculty, the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI) conducted such a review. Faculty responses to the question, "What knowledge, skills, habits, and/or other attributes of mind or behavior best characterize a well-educated person in today's society?" were synthesized into 111 statements, which were formulated and distributed as a questionnaire to faculty and Student Affairs staff. Faculty indicated that essential attributes included such critical thinking and reasoning skills as "knows how to learn," "is able to bring reason to bear in the solution of problems," "exhibits intellectual curiosity," "assumes responsibility for his own behavior," and "possesses an open, receptive mind." Such characteristics can be developed through either traditional arts and sciences courses or occupational subjects, with good teaching serving as the key in any discipline. (EJV)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED271152

A UNIFYING THEME FOR GENERAL EDUCATION IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

by

Bryan Blanchard
Community College of Rhode Island

National Workshop
General Education and
the Mission of the Community Colleges
Princeton University
March 1984

JC 860 358

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☑ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

B. BLANCHARD

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

A Unifying Theme for General Education in Community Colleges

Bryan Blanchard, Community College of Rhode Island
National Workshop
General Education and the Mission of the Community Colleges
Princeton University, March, 1984

For the second time since the end of World War II, national attention has focused on the issue of general education in American colleges and universities. As a prestigious report noted on the first occasion, "a supreme need in American education is for a unifying purpose and idea." This is no less true today. Indeed, judging from the concerns raised in the current debate on both the national and local levels, today's need may be even greater. It is also noteworthy that the history of the American collegiate curriculum from the 1940's until today presents a unifying theme which can fill the need. At least that is the view of a faculty committee charged with addressing this issue at the Community College of Rhode Island.

The Context of the Current Debate:
The American Process of Curriculum Reform (1945 to the present). If American higher education may be depicted metaphorically as a long, snake-like procession (as David Reisman once essayed), a small number of prestigious senior institutions would be at its head. The middle ranks would contain a much larger group of schools trying to copy what they judged to be the progressive practices of the leaders. Farther back would be the community and junior colleges whose students must march to the cadence of the middle and whose marshals are likewise influenced by the head. In the late 1940's, the vanguard used core and distribution requirements to deliver the message of Harvard's "Redbook" and the Truman Commission on Higher Education (two important statements on general education). In their turn, so did the middle. Since we in the community college sector aim at transferring students to the other two, our institutions followed suit. In fact, at the Community College of Rhode Island early degree patterns corresponded closely to those of nearby senior institutions.

As is commonly known, curriculum changed drastically in the early 1970's. In the Degradation of Academic Dogma (1971), Robert Nisbet suggested why. Nisbet argued that until that time, members of the American academy shared a common belief about the nature of higher education. The service that institutions offered society was indirect, delivered through the students they educated. The essence of service lay not in what institutions did but what they were. The dogma was simple: "Knowledge is important. Just that. Not 'relevant' knowledge; not 'practical' knowledge; not the kind of knowledge that enables one to wield power, achieve success, or influence others. Knowledge!" This was the idea of knowledge for its own sake. But Nisbet did not have in mind an egalitarianism of knowledge. Plainly some kinds of knowledge had always been regarded as more important than others, often in inverse relation to their utility in the real world. The ideal was scholarship,

"what the academic dogma...has been about for close to 800 years." It followed that it was appropriate for students to study works of scholarship and to seek to think like scholars. In the post-war years, curricula followed the dogma.

But the dogma changed during those same years. As institutions welcomed enlarged responsibilities and sought new sources of revenue, they undermined both their authority and their ideal of dispassionate inquiry. On campus, a new relativism emerged, one in which the importance of one idea was not allowed to overshadow another. It followed that if all disciplines were equal, everyone should have equal influence on the determination of academic policy. In effect, the foundations of the curriculum disintegrated. Thus when the student upheavals of the 1960's and 1970's occurred, institutions were hard-pressed to defend the status quo in the face of arguments that it was elitist and irrelevant. An observation from Tocqueville's famous study of the French Revolution offers perspective on the change:

> Chance played no part whatever in the outbreak of the Revolution: though it took the world by surprise, it was the inevitable outcome of a long period of gestation, the abrupt and violent conclusion of a process in which generations had played intermittent part. Even if it had not taken place, the old structure would nonetheless have been shattered everywhere sooner or later.

The Current Debate on General Education

All over the country, faculties are now showing renewed interest in general education. Two highly touted events, a Carnegie report which declared general education "a disaster area" and Harvard's adoption of a new core, have touched off a national debate on the curriculum. Evidence such as declining test scores, grade inflation, and employer criticisms of college graduates not being able to read and write have prompted public laments by academics themselves about the erosion of standards. As the director of a national project on general education has said,"somehow [the] failures have been linked in the minds of many to the relaxation of graduation requirements and to a laissez-faire attitude about which courses students take." But it would probably be a mistake to simply resurrect the core requirements of an earlier era. What is necessary is for individual institutions to review the needs of their students and their own capacity to satisfy those needs. At the very least this process yields solutions which faculty consider their own and provides a powerful asset to implementation. Beyond this, however, a unifying theme is still an imperative.

The Practical Reality of Campus Policy-Making

Whenever an institution considers changing a portion of its curriculum, powerful social forces come into play. It has frequently been suggested that academic decisions are the products of a collegial process in which faculty participate as a community of scholars. This is probably overly optimistic. A political model more likely describes campus interaction:

various disciplinary and interest groups vie collectively for influence over setting policy. Nowhere is this more evident than in decisions made on degree requirements. Early in the process, debates commonly reflect the intellectual considerations of dispassionate observers. How, for example, might the traditional disciplines foster individual growth? But as the process grinds on, departmental representatives often seek to ensure stable enrollments through political exchanges and the formation of campus coalitions. This reality has been reinforced further by the institutionalization of collective bargaining in higher education.

Any campus committee charged with addressing the general education issue faces these same forces. Our own committee took a number of steps to respond to this reality as well as to gather information and pertinent opinion.* Ironically, it was in seeking to defuse self interest that we reached the conclusion that most of the important outcomes of higher education are related more to good teaching and persistent inquiry than to the substance of particular courses. This is the possible unifying theme mentioned above.

Community College of Rhode Island Delphi Project

The Community College of Rhode Island is a comprehensive institution. As such, its staff represents a large number of occupational areas as well as the traditional academic disciplines. When indications of partisan influence became evident, the committee on general education attempted to revise the thrust of its inquiry: instead of asking what are the optimal inputs to higher education (which might prompt arguments comparing the merits of one discipline over another), the committee chose to consider the most desirable outcomes. The committee decided to conduct a college-wide survey of faculty views on this question and to tap the rich array of perspectives represented within the institution. The mechanism chosen for the inquiry was the Delphi Technique of the applied social sciences.

* Other institutions may be interested in the topics the committee investigated. They were: the historical context of the general education issue; the current national debate; our own curriculum history; the transfer question; the characteristics and needs of our students; the relationship of support services to the academic program; advisement; the issue of informed student choice on programs; core curricula at senior institutions, core curricula at other community colleges; articulation with the lower schools; the relationship of certain identifying community college characteristics (e.g. open access, comprehensiveness) to general education; the basic skills issue; placement; outcome testing; and institutional costs.

The Delphi technique is a tool for collecting data or judgments and for developing consensus. It attempts to overcome the weaknesses inherent in surveys, "one-shot" group averages, and round-table discussions. The classic characterization of Delphi was written by researchers from the Rand Corporation who said it was "a carefully designed program of sequential interrogations (best conducted by questionnaire) interspersed with information and opinion feedback." Since the method substitutes a computed consensus for verbal consensus, it has the advantage of not requiring large groups to be convened. Instead, it can be done by mail, but nevertheless may be viewed as a series of individual conferences conducted with the group members. The main characteristics of Delphi are

1. Each participant makes his contributions at each step of the process before he knows the opinions of the other participants.
2. Responses are made anonymously.
3. Information gained at each stage is shared with all participants prior to the next stage.

The intent of the process is to reduce the effect of dominant individuals on the thinking of other group members while at the same time fostering an exchange of ideas. Typically, Delphi begins with an open-ended inquiry which identifies the issue and asks respondents for their initial opinions. Then questionnaires are developed on the basis of the responses and administered to the same group of respondents. Our project began with a single question which the committee felt lay at the heart of the general education issue: What knowledge, skills, habits and/or other attributes of mind or behavior (e.g. values, attitudes) best characterize a well-educated person in today's society? The committee reasoned that every faculty member would bring a unique perspective to bear on this question. Everyone's individual background and association with his own discipline or vocation would highlight different types of knowledge as being important. What the committee was after were the commonalities, the basic types of knowledge which might be generally useful to people. Our initial inquiry resulted in a large number of responses. The committee reviewed these responses looking for common answers and eventually reduced all the answers (many of which were in the form of essays) to 111 statements. The statements were then written into questionnaire form and distributed as a survey. The results were informative. Of the twenty-four characteristics which received responses of "Essential" nearly all were affective attributes of critical thinking and reasoning skills which could be gained from study in many different areas and only a few referred to specific types of knowledge. Examples of the first group of characteristics included

- knows how to learn
- is able to bring reason to bear in the solution of problems
- exhibits intellectual curiosity
- assumes responsibility for his own behavior
- possesses an open, receptive mind
- constantly seeks deeper knowledge of his particular occupation, profession or field of interest.

. always attempts to stretch himself intellectually
. takes responsibility for his own continuing education
. understands his own limitations and lack of knowledge
. is able to think abstractly and reflectively

Clearly the development of these attributes has more to do with how courses are taught than what is taught. Indeed, these attributes focused the committee's attention on the delivery of general education and away from the content of required courses. The other seven characteristics which drew responses of "Essential" all had to do with the basic skills. It seems that no matter what their individual perspectives, faculty members prize clear expression, good reading ability, and mathematics skills.

The committee also administered the Delphi questionnaire to the members of the college's Student Affairs staff. It is worth noting that their responses on these items were strikingly similar to those of the faculty. For example, "Knows how to learn" and "is able to bring reason to bear in the solution of problems" were among the first three items on both lists. Moreover, most of the items classed as "Essential" on one list were so classed on the other. This may indicate that there is more congruence among views within community colleges than is generally thought.

A Unifying Theme for General Education

Students now enter a world of incredible specialization where individual disciplines and occupations have been subdivided into worlds unto themselves. Under these circumstances it is probably unrealistic to promote the adoption of a common body of knowledge which might link all educated men and women and support some sort of national sense of community, however desirable that might seem to some. Besides, imposing such order might even represent the antithesis of the ideal of liberation which higher education has long claimed to promote. But the pageant of curricula change does present us with a series of stages, each of which contains possible guidance. We should now respond with a synthesis. From the academic dogma, the classic approach of scholarship offers an ideal for student behavior. From the egalitarianism of the post-war years may come a new richness of perspectives. And from the present debate may be added an emphasis on basic skills, broadly defined. Our unifying theme and purpose should be a refinement of our expectations for student performance in all areas and the coordination of these expectations across disciplinary and occupational lines. The focus of the debate on general education should be on how subjects are taught, not on what is taught.

A final comment on the inclusion of occupational education in the general education issue is in order. The grand tradition in higher education has long been that students should draw knowledge from the established disciplines of the arts and sciences. But if higher

education is defined as equipping students with basic skills, fostering critical thinking, and demonstrating how subjects and questions can be approached from many perspectives, it is unrealistic to contend that only the arts and sciences can benefit students. In fact, if the arts and sciences are taught as a rhetoric of conclusions, if all student responses must be in agreement with some predetermined plan, the grand tradition itself will produce negative results. Nor is there even need to refute this sort of conformity. T.H. Huxley long ago put the matter to rest with his attack on the British examination system. Examinees, Huxley said, work to pass, not to know; and Nature takes her revenge when they do pass and do not know.

The important characteristics identified in the Community College of Rhode Island Delphi Project can be developed through either the study of traditional or occupational subjects. Occupational study may require basic skills in mathematics and reading and may even broaden a student's communication skills as he seeks to express unfamiliar technical concepts in language. The fostering of problem-solving and critical thinking may also be important outcomes. Nor should one expect that the student's perspectives would be limited by such study. Rather, for the typical student, the experience more likely would be broadening. It might even serve as a model of how numerous perspectives might be brought to bear on a single issue. For example, in describing the role of technology in education, Eric Ashby has written

> One cannot design a radio set without paying attention to appearance, which involves aesthetics; or to its cost, which involves economics; or to the use which people will make of it, which involves sociology and public policy as well as broadcast ing. Human problems are woven into the very texture of technology.

Good teaching can single the problems out for student consideration and analysis in any discipline or occupation.

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE
FOR JUNIOR COLLEGES

AUG 1 1986